‘Talking Sculpture: Dialects of Making’ | Skins, Shells, Snails

Panel 1: The Matter of Materials
Panel Chair: Becky Gee
Speakers: Dr. Victoria Sharples, Katrina Cowling, Alexandra Harley

York St John University
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CHAIR INTRODUCTION

Dr. Victoria Sharples (she/they) is an artist, researcher and curator from South Yorkshire. Their practice operates in the milieu of new materialism, meditating on the performativity of matter with a focus on (non)human microperformativity, technoscientific apparatus and necro-ecologies & economies.

Sharples is co-director of GLOAM (gallery & studios) in Sheffield’s Cultural Industries Conservation Area (CIQ) and co-leads the ‘New Materialist Reading Group’ (NMRG) at the University of Derby, where she is a Lecturer in Fine art.

INTRODUCTION

Thank you Becky for the introduction, and to Charlotte, TSM, Vessel, York St John & The Henry Moore Foundation for giving me an opportunity to share my practice-research with you today as part of ‘Talking Sculpture: Dialects of Making’, and to contribute to this panel through a short paper, which I have named: Skins, Shells, and Snails. This presentation responds to this panel’s provocation ‘The Matter of Materials’, which for me offers a generative proposition for meditating on some site-specific approaches to making sculpture, as well as speculating on the conditionality of materials and some (non)human bodies I have co-operated with as part of my research.

In contributing to this event, with its attention on abstract sculpture made by women and non-binary artists, this presentation calls on trans-corporality and material discourses, focusing on the transience of matter; that is, it’s permeability across *spacetimematterings* (Barad, 2015 410). In support of outlining a dialect of making (and as a genesis to this presentation), it feels appropriate to start with my making-language which includes signifiers of permanence and impermanence: secretion, porousness, leaching, and seepage, as well as preservation, suspension, curing, and heft. This lexicon not only provides a vocabulary for making, but procures the conditions of making in the production of membrane-like forms, where matter overturns taxonomies and reductive binary structures.

In particular, my research contributes to contemporary dialogues on the permeability of bodies, what Stacy Alaimo refers to as our *trans*-corporeality (Alaimo 2010), but attention is also paid to ‘necro-ecologies’, that being the study of *posthumous* material relations, and a soft-approach to Eyal Weizman’s premise of ‘forensic architecture’ (Weizman, 2012, 2021). Like Karen Barad’s ‘agential trans*materiality’ (2015) and Rosi Bradotti’s ‘active trans-position’ (2006), the *trans-* in trans-corporeality signifies a plethora of intersectional readings transecting ontologies of animacy and the sensorial, biotechnical interventions (i.e., birth, growth, ailment, and death), human, animal and plant bodies, and spaces of trans-ition, whether *-gender*, *-species* or interior-exterior relations). It takes as a starting point the premise that bodies are porous and intra-active (Barad, 2007), offering a conduit for thought. Here, the prefix functions as a becoming and ontological folding binary sensibilities. Please note, this paper contains some

sensitive content on the subject of death-care practices which some people may find upsetting. Please feel free to take a pause from this session at any point if you wish to do so.

AN ELASTIC CONTINUUM

To situate theory in practice, this presentation builds on the production of a site-specific sculptural piece which was first shown in 2023 as part of *An Elastic Continuum*, a New Materialist Reading Group exhibition and symposium. Arriving from the proposition of 'skin', *An Elastic Continuum* offered an interface with *skinnings*: surfaces, architectural structures, organisms, membranes and embalmings. The word 'skinnings' has been used purposefully here in reference to the Swiss artist Heidi Bucher, whose abstractive practice involved *skinning* procedures to produce sculptural blueprints of architectural spaces often using water, gauze, nacre (or mother of pearl), and latex.

HEIDI BUCHER (SLIDE 3)

In the publication *Heidi Bucher: Metamorphoses* (2022), curator Jana Baumann comments on the properties of latex. She observes *leathery and fibrous in appearance, the latex, which is subject to an ageing process, is reminiscent of skin […] The skin, [which is an] interface to the outside world, surrounds the body as a protective shell; at the same time, life and consciousness inscribe themselves onto its surface* (Baumann, 2022, p.121).

In working with both latex and silicone rubber over the past few years, I too have become familiar with their material affordances: latex is complicit with the aging process (i.e., transience) or – in the case of silicone – a permeance, or afterlife of around 500 years. Bucher's allegory of a shell, as a protective skin, and as a symbol of bodies and architecture (i.e., in interior and exterior), continues to be something that permeates much of my practice-research, specifically in thinking about empty buildings as empty shells, where empty shells are calcified spaces where bodies are no more. And so, for my contribution to *An Elastic Continuum*, I produced *Soft Shell* (2023).

SOFT SHELL

The composite sculpture was made using around 150 ceramic tiles, 10kg of translucent silicone rubber, and 22kg of condensation cure silicone to produce casts of architectural features, explicitly a sink and gutter-way (also known as wet-room cove skirting) in a disused chapel and mortuary. In reference to quantum field theory's understanding that matter is 'a condensation of other beings, places, and times' (Barad, 2015, p. 416), condensation cure silicone acted as a material prompt. The use of silicone rubber was purposeful in *Soft Shell*: a material used for medical implants, procedures and (in some death-care practices) preservation, to slow the process of putrefaction. I was granted access to the chapel while it was used by GUT Level, a queer not-for-profit community space and collective in Sheffield, through which I gained access to the mortuary. I have often noted that gaining access to working-mortuaries is hard, unless you have passed-on, and so I am thankful that GUT Level welcomed me into the space. There were many significant aspects about GUT Level's occupancy of the building, but their re-claiming of the medico-religious space for safe club nights in affirmation of queer-togetherness was formative to say the least.

Before I could begin the casting process, the architectural features needed to be cleaned, rinsed and dried. The cleaning of the space, in preparation for the casting-abstraction, felt synonymous with death-care practices and the former use of the facility: primarily, in the preparation and bathing of bodies. Once cleaned, the liquescent silicone and

hardening catalyst was poured into the sink and the gutter-way, allowing the material to cure at an ambient temperature for a few days. On return to the facility, the sink cast was removed, and peeled away with heft, and I was relieved to see that the suction plug I had placed over the drain had contained the material from discharging into the plumbing below. The coving-cast was not so contained: the material had secreted beyond the mould to produce a skirt-like form reminiscent of something fluid in suspension, or as an alternative reading something snail-like in appearance, either muscular or mucous in its substance.

CASTINGS

In aesthetics and approach, the cast-inversions are abstractions and figurations of bodily absences. The casts function as a *skinnings* of the building; as relics, embalmings, and positive-negative imprints of the facility. They uphold Bucher's conception that 'walls are shells that can be shed like a skin' (p.89). The casts call attention to the slippage of binaries (i.e., interior–exterior, present–passed, empty–full), and are suggestive of mortuary masks or sculptural effigies. There was also something forensic about their production. Like Bucher's latex that abstracts the form, patina and wounds of architectural surfaces, the silicone used in *Soft Shell* participated in its own collection of micro-matter through the abstractive process, evidenced through marks, residues, and surface-transfers.

TILES

Before the casting, I had fabricated a tiled structure on which the silicone pieces could sit. In reference to the architecture of the building, with its permeations across space and time, the skeleton-like structure composed of planes of perpendicular lines, provides a formal proposition for observing the parameters and potentiality of matter. The grid-composition, synonymous to graph paper, allows the structure to be performative in its presence: at once material and immaterial, swaying between flat and volumetric, presenting a continuum of *spacetimematterings*. For me, the structure also suggests an autopsy-table or tomb, offering an interface with bodily dimensions and cooling temperatures, akin to the *trans*-ience of algor mortis. The tiles provide a seemingly impermeable barrier, one that appears to be water-tight, as if to contain seepage. Here, the sculpture offers parallels between bodies and the site: markedly in the infrastructure and plumbing of the building (that is, the basins, drains and pipes), and bodies which, after death, becomes liquescent as 'slippage' of our skins begins, and tissues percolate from orificial openings.

I have often speculated on the premise that we belong to one reservoir, a hydro-commons. Astrida Neimanis attests to this in her publication *Bodies of Water* (2017), where she observes: 'our wet matters are in a constant process of intake, transformation and exchange' [...] we leak and seethe, [...] [and are] always vulnerable to rupture and renegotiation (p.2). Following our passing, our fluids permeate beyond the body into 'symbiotic condensations' (Neimanis, 2007, p. 29). We collectively drain and pool, participating in a hermaphroditic condition that sees no separation of matter: no partition of the human and non-human. This inseparable condition argues against the premise of a hermetically-sealed selfhood (what we call 'I'), pushing against the humanist understanding of a singular and discreate corporality. This is explicated by feminist scholar Donna Haraway in her principle of 'sympoiesis' (2016), meaning making-together or making-with (Silova, 2021, p. 594).

SNAILS

In support of this, *Soft Shell* co-operated with a walk of snails, hermaphroditic animals, in recognition of our shared *trans*-formation. In nod to the scalloped shell used in Christian baptisms, symbolising re-birth, and in acknowledgement of the sites' former use as a chapel, *Soft Shell* offered the shelled gastropod an as another emblem to signify our *trans*-fused constitution. Throughout the exhibition, snails secreted slime made of proteins, enzymes, peptides, and trace minerals across the surface of the sculpture to make their silvery lines. Unlike empty shells that are the calcified remains of some long-dead organism, this walk of snails suggested a new dialogue; one of togetherness and continual renewal.

CONCLUSION

As an iteration of *Soft Shell*, I went on to produce *Gurney* (2023), a moveable sculpture that is transitional in structure and content. For me, the work oscillates between death-care apparatus and something reminiscent of a gastropod carrying its shell: something half-mollusc and half-medical, soft and hard bodied, as we all are in the transition from present to passed.

In the production of these works, I became acutely attentive to the premise of transience. In the sculptures making, I not only wanted to survey sites of *trans*-ition (as with medico-religious facilities), or the 'transmigration of form' following biological cessation (Oestigaard, 2005) (i.e., putrefaction, seepage, confluence, and re-constitution), but the *trans*-corporeality and conditionality of materials themselves. As with Alaimo's *trans*-corporeality, *Soft Shell* and *Gurney* attest to the porosity and permeability of bodies, markedly in their intersection of 'substance, flesh and place' (Alaymo, 2018, p.436).